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CIA seeks to unite Sandinistas' foes

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WASHINGTON — The Central Intelligence Agency is attempting to forge an alliance of three main armed groups fighting Nicaragua's leftist government, intelligence sources said Thursday.

CIA briefers have told congressional intelligence committees that the effort, if successful, would result in a combined rebel army of 12,000 to 15,000 fighters, the sources said.

If the unification bid fails, however — which appears likely, given the animosities among the rebel groups — the CIA would proceed with plans to increase the size of the rebel group it already supports to about 15,000 fighters from its current strength of 7,000 to 8,000, the intelligence sources said.

They said this information has been relayed to the House and Senate intelligence committees and was repeated Thursday at a closed briefing for the House Armed Services Committee. Neither the committee nor the CIA had any comment.

The full House, meanwhile, cleared for debate and vote — possibly next week — a bill that would end covert CIA aid to anti-Sandinista rebels. Instead of the clandestine campaign, it would authorize an \$80-million program for above-board operations to cut off Cuban and Nicaraguan arms supplies to leftist guerrillas in Central America.

The bill was cleared for debate despite efforts by the White House, the CIA and several House leaders of both parties toward a compromise that would allow the CIA to

continue covert aid to the rebels unless the Sandinistas agree to stop aiding guerrillas in El Salvador.

Congressional officials said debate on the bill is scheduled to begin Tuesday with a rare, four-hour, secret session of the House, followed by 15 hours of open session. Tuesday coincidentally is the fourth anniversary of the triumph of the Sandinista revolution over former President Anastasio Somoza.

CIA and Pentagon briefers said plans to form the rebel alliance or augment the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) were at the "discussion stage," reported congressional sources with access to intelligence information.

If the plans are approved formally by the National Security Council and President Reagan, they will be added to a proposed "finding," or intelligence authorization report, to be submitted soon to Congress.

The report, requested by the Senate Intelligence Committee, must be delivered before the end of the 1983 fiscal year on Sept. 30. It then must be endorsed by a majority of the Republican-controlled committee to secure approval of \$19 million in operating funds for the CIA to pursue its not-so-secret operations against the Nicaraguan regime.

The CIA briefers said they are considering requesting more money to equip and feed a larger guerrillas force, and are weighing a widening of the objectives of the rebel operation, the sources reported.